

Chronic Problem Properties in Saint Paul: Case Study Lessons



Saint Paul City Council Council Research Report March 2002

FOCUS OF THE RESEARCH REPORT:

Chronic problem properties are properties which cause major problems for the City and its neighborhoods. They are characterized by nuisance, property and violent crime and numerous code enforcement violations — such as broken windows, garbage and junk vehicles. This study examines the causes of chronic problem properties in Saint Paul, as well as how they manifest themselves in our neighborhoods, and what seems to work to solve or mitigate the problems they present. In order to address these important issues, 32 case studies were developed using extensive information from City and County records and interviews with some of the key people involved with these properties.

Chronic Problem Properties are properties with violations which are

- *serious*— founded and substantial;
- *repetitive*— at least 3 instances of problems in 18 months;
- *enduring*— active as a problem property for at least 18 months; and which
- *adversely affect* their neighbors and/or the community as a whole.

KEY FINDINGS ABOUT HOW CHRONIC PROBLEM PROPERTIES COME INTO BEING

- Chronic problem properties can be distinguished from “regular” problem properties in that their problems remain unresolved for extended periods of time. This often means the original problems are complicated and exacerbated by additional problems.
- In all of the case studies, both the owner and the government were unable or unwilling to effectively address the problem(s).
- Predisposing conditions for chronic problem property development include:
 - Poverty of Household;
 - Old Age, Poor Construction & Maintenance of Building;
 - Geographic Concentration of Blight;
 - Personal and Behavioral Factors — Violence, Disorderly Youth, Mental Illness, Drugs and Alcohol Abuse
 - Lack of Neighborhood Collective Efficacy & Social Capital

How It Works:

- Owner-Landlord-Manager Must Be Unwilling or Unable to Effectively Address the Problem(s)
- Government Must Be Unwilling or Unable to Effectively Address the Problem(s)
- Tenants, Neighbors and Neighborhoods May Be Unwilling or Unable to Effectively Address the Problem(s)
- There Are Probably Predisposing Conditions

KEY FINDINGS ABOUT LIVING WITH THE PROBLEMS

- Chronic problem properties can be characterized by both:
 - **Physical Disorder**— broken windows, boarded vacant buildings, abandoned buildings, dilapidated buildings, garbage/trash/litter, tall grass/weeds, junk cars, vandalism, abandoned vehicles, dumping, noise, bars and graffiti.
 - **Social Disorder**— prostitution, public drinking, unpredictable people, panhandlers, mentally disturbed, harassment/haranguing, school disruption, gang violence, rowdy teens, sexual harassment on the street, domestic disputes that spill into public spaces, public insults, vagrancy, drug dealing, auto theft, arguing/fighting among neighbors, lack of traffic enforcement, robbery, loitering, gunfire, weapons, curfew violations, dog fighting, truancy and gambling.
- Chronic problem properties in Saint Paul exhibit many of these signs of physical and social disorder which researchers indicate lead to neighborhood and community decline.
- We estimate that roughly 220-280 of the City's 79,000 properties are chronic problem properties.

Of our 32 Cases Studied in 24 months:

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| ▪ 88% had Domestic Violence | ▪ 44% had Broken Windows/Screens & Junk Vehicles |
| ▪ 66% had Disorderly Youth & Other Violence | ▪ 41% had Tall Grass and Weeds & Auto Theft |
| ▪ 63% had Garbage/Trash Build-Up - Exterior | ▪ 38% had Public Drinking, Floor Coverings & Fights |
| ▪ 59% had Narcotics/Drugs | ▪ 34% had Aggravated Assault, |
| ▪ 56% had Disturbances & Vandalism | ▪ Broken/Missing Door Locks, Junk Furniture |
| ▪ 50% had Theft | ▪ 31% had Exterior Paint Problems |
| ▪ 47% had Burglary | |

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KEY FINDINGS ABOUT DEALING WITH THE PROBLEMS

Code Enforcement, Animal Control, Licensing, Zoning, Police, Fire and EMS Services Cost the City for our 32 Case Studies cost the City:

- \$2,500 / Year for the "Cheapest"
 - \$10,000 / Year on Average
 - \$35,000 / Year for the Most "Expensive"
- \$1.9 to \$2.5 Million a Year for 220 - 280 CPPs

Of the 32 Case Studies:

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| ▪ 100% had Police Calls for Service: Average 26 Calls Per Unit (2 years), 1- and 2-Unit Houses Average 36 Calls Per Unit | ▪ 50% had Citations, with an average of 2.4 per property |
| ▪ 75% had Abateements, with an average of 3.5 per property | ▪ 47% had FORCE Buys & Surveillance, with an average of 3.1 per property |
| ▪ 69% had Correction Notices for code violations, with an average of 2.7 per property | ▪ 44% had FORCE Knock & Talks, with an average of 2.3 per property |
| ▪ 67% of the case studies had Emergency Medical Services, with an average of 1.4 per property | ▪ 41% had C of O Revocations |
| ▪ 53% of the case studies had Fire Suppression, with an average of 0.7 per property | ▪ 34% had FORCE Arrests, with an average of 1.9 per property |
| | ▪ 34% had Condemnations, with an average of 1.4 per property |
| | ▪ 34% had FORCE Search Warrants |
| | ▪ 28% had FORCE Search Warrants Problem Properties Task Force |

KEY FINDINGS ABOUT CURING THE PROBLEMS

- ❑ Government needs better methods for identifying and sharing information among agencies about these properties.
 - Information systems that support the cross-agency identification of chronic problem properties
 - Easy cross-departmental referral among field staff, so that police officers and paramedics who often see deplorable conditions can quickly and easily refer these properties to inspection staff
 - Information systems that support the cross-agency sharing of problems at the property and actions taken to resolve them
- ❑ Once government agencies have identified and shared information on these properties, the information needs to be used to better "case manage" problems at the property. Case management would also offer the opportunity to
 - Prosecute in a way that takes into account the total affect the property has on the community;
 - Conduct "knock & talks" with owner and occupants about the City services consumed and the effect the property is having on the community;
 - Such conversations could be broadened to introduce a "restorative justice" component.
- ❑ A more proactive inspection policy, possibly including a periodic-systematic inspection approach for one- and two-unit rental housing, could also help government more effectively address chronic problem properties.
- ❑ Fully utilize tools already at the government's disposal. The City should examine its policies and practices related to chronic problem properties, including citations, City-initiated Tenant Remedy Actions and City-initiated unlawful detainers.
- ❑ The County could examine making market value determinations more current, the use of nuisance property takings and community prosecution, and Housing Court fine levels and this court's capacity to deal with the many and complex problems of these properties.
- ❑ Ideas that may help in the prevention of chronic problem properties relate primarily to:
 - Empowering and persuading property owners and government to solve, rather than just "deal with," the problems facing them; and
 - Reducing and minimizing those factors which predispose a property to becoming a chronic problem, including poverty, blight, building abandonment, poor building conditions, violence and drug/alcohol abuse.

METHODOLOGY

- ❑ The research process primarily involved developing 32 case studies and conducting a thorough literature review.
- ❑ Case studies were developed using:
 - Data and record review;
 - Interviews and site visits; and
 - Field inspections and Police ride-alongs.
- ❑ The Case Studies were selected by a process where:
 - Elected officials, district councils and inspection staff suggested 275 different properties for study as chronic problem properties.
 - Examining police and inspection records for 100 of the 275, we found that 60% met our definition of chronic problem properties.
- ❑ The study list was narrowed from 60 to 32 case studies by eliminating some of the properties found in "clusters" of chronic problem properties, and some which were owned by the same owner. A small number of case studies were eliminated because we were unable to create a complete case study, as records were incomplete or it was impossible to interview people relevant to the property.

FOR QUESTIONS, COMMENTS OR A COPY OF THE REPORT PLEASE CONTACT:

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